

# The Master Mummer by E. Phillips Oppenheim

(Continued from Last Week.)

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CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.  
WHEN Monsieur Feurges continued, his voice was a little softer but no less firm.

"Dear friend," he said, "I will be honest. When Isobel was taken from me I had days and hours of hideous agony. But it was the craving for her body only, the touch of her lips, the caress of her hands, the sound of her voice. Her spirit has been with me always. At first, perhaps, her coming was faint and indefinable, but with every day I realized her more fully. I called her, and she sat in her box and watched me play, and kissed her when I rose to me. I closed the door upon the world and called her back to my room, call her into my arms, whisper the old words, call her those names which she loves best—and she is there, and all my burden of sorrow falls away. My friend, a great love can do this! A great pure love can mock even at the grave."

I clasped his hand in mine.  
"I think," I said, "that I will never pity you again. You have triumphed even over Fate—even over those terrible, relentless laws which sometimes make a ghastly nightmare of life, even to the happiest of us. You have turned sorrow into joy. It is a great deed. You have made my own suffering seem almost a vulgar thing."

"Ah, no," he said, "for you, too, there is hope. You, too, know that we need never be the idle, restless slaves of Fate—like those others. Will and faith and purity can kindle a magic flame to lighten the darkness of the greatest sorrow. I speak to you of these things—now—because I think that the end is near."

He suddenly sank into his chair. I looked at him in alarm, but his face was radiant. There was no sign of any illness there.  
"You are young, Arnold Greatson," he said. "They tell me that you will be famous. Yet you are not one of those to turn your face to the wall because the greatest gift of life is withheld from you. That is why I have lifted the curtain of my own days. I know you, and I know that you will triumph. It is a world of compensations after all for those who have the wit to understand."

I think that he had more to say to me, but we were interrupted. There was a knock at the door, and the man entered whom I had seen talking with Feurges upon the platform of the railway station. Feurges rose at once, calm and prepared. They talked for a while so rapidly that I could not follow them. Then he turned to me.  
"They are preparing for a move," he announced. "They are going south as though for Marseilles and Algiers, but they insist upon a special train. They have declined a saloon attached to the train de luxe, and Monsieur Estere here has doubts as to their real destination. Wait here until I return. Be prepared for a journey."

They left me alone. I lit a cigarette and settled down to read. In less than half an hour, however, I was disturbed. There was a knock at the door, and Madame Tobin entered.  
"There is a lady here, sir, who desires to see Monsieur!" she announced.

A fair, slight woman in a long travelling cloak brushed past her. She raised her veil, and I started at once to my feet. It was Lady Delahaye.

CHAPTER XXIX  
I did not need a word from Lady Delahaye to acquaint me fully with what had happened. Indeed, my only wonder had been that this knowledge had not come to her before. She greeted me with a smile, but her face was full of purpose.

"Where is he?" she asked simply.  
"Not here," I answered.  
She seated herself, and began to unpin the travelling veil from her hat.  
"So I perceive," she remarked. "He will return?"  
"Yes," I admitted, "he will return."

She folded the veil upon her knee and looked across at me thoughtfully.  
"What an idiot I have been!" she murmured. "After all, that emerald necklace might easily have been mine."  
"I am not so sure about that," I answered. "I think I know what is in your mind, but I might remind you that suspicion is one thing and proof another."

"The motive," she answered, "is the difficult thing, and that is found. I suppose the police are good for something. They should be able to work backwards from a certainty."

"Are you?" I asked, "going to employ the police? Don't you think that, for the good of everyone, and even for your husband's sake, the thing had better remain where it is?"

She laughed scornfully.  
"You would have me be the man go free who shot another in the back treacherously and without warning?" she exclaimed. "Thank you for your advice, Arnold Greatson. I have a different purpose in my mind."

I moved my chair and drew a little nearer to her.  
"Lady Delahaye," I began, "the use of my Christian name," she murmured, "would perhaps make your persuasions more effective. At any rate, you might try. I have never forbidden you to use it."

"If you have any regard for me at all, then, Elleen," I said, "you will think seriously before you take any steps against Monsieur Feurges. Remember that he had, or thought he had, very strong reasons for acting as he did. Looking at it charitably, your husband's proceedings were open to very grave misconstruction. There will be a great deal of unpleasant scandal if the story is taken up again, and Isobel's whole history will be told in court. How will that suit the Archduchess?"

"Not at all," Lady Delahaye admitted frankly. "But the Archduchess is not the only person to be considered. You seem to forget that this is no trifling matter. It is a murderer whom you are shielding. The man who killed my husband whom you would have me let go free."

"Technically," I admitted, "not actually. Your husband did not die of his wound. He was in a very bad state of health."

"I cannot recognize the distinction," Lady Delahaye declared coldly. "He died from shock following it."

"Consider for a moment the position of Monsieur Feurges," I pleaded. "Isobel was the only child of the woman whom he had dearly loved. The care of her was a charge upon his conscience and upon his honor. Any open association with him he felt might be to her detriment later on in life. All that he could do was to watch over her from a distance. He saw her, as he imagined, in danger. What course was open to him? Forget for the moment that Major Delahaye was your husband. Put yourself in the place of Feurges. What could he do but strike?"

"He broke the law," she said coldly, "the law of men and of God. He must take the consequences. I am not a vindictive woman. I would have forgiven him for making a scene, for striking my husband, or taking away the child by force. But he went too far."

"Have you," I asked, "been to the police?"  
"Not yet."

"I caught at this faint hope."

"You came here to see him first? You have something to propose—some compromise?"  
She shook her head slowly.  
"Between Monsieur Feurges and myself," she said, "there can be no question of anything of the sort. There is nothing which he could offer me, nothing within his power to offer, which could induce me in the slightest."

"Then why," I asked, "are you here?"  
"To see you," she answered. "I want to ask you this, Arnold. You wish Monsieur Feurges to go free. You wish to stay my hand. What price are you willing to pay?"

I looked at her blankly. As yet her meaning was hidden from me.  
"Any price!" I declared.

"What is he to you, Arnold—this man?" she asked softly. "You are wonderfully loyal to some of your friends."

"I know the story of his life," I answered, "and it is enough. Besides, he is an old man, and I fancy that his health is failing. Let him end his days in peace. You will never regret it, Elleen. If my gratitude is worth anything to you—"

"I want," she interrupted, "more than your gratitude."

We sat looking at each other for a moment in a silence which I for my part could not have broken. I read in her face, in her altered expression, and the softened gleam of her eyes, all that I was expected to read. I said nothing.

"It is not so very many years, Arnold," she went on, "since you cared for me, or said that you did. I have not changed so much, have I? Give up this senseless pursuit of a child. Oh, you guard your secret very bravely, but you cannot hide the truth from me. It is not all philanthropy which has made you such a squire of dames. You believe that you care for her—that child! Arnold, it is a foolish fancy. You belong to different hemispheres; you are twelve years apart. It will be years before she can even realize what life and love may be. Give it all up. She is in safe hands now. Come back to London with me, and Monsieur Feurges shall go free."

"Monsieur Feurges, madame, thank you!"  
He had entered the room softly, and stood at the end of the screen. Lady Delahaye's face darkened.

"May I ask, sir, how long you have been playing the eaves-dropper?" she demanded.

"Not so long, madame, as I should have desired," he answered, "yet long enough to understand this. My young friend here seems to be trying to bargain with you for my safety. Madame, I cannot allow it. If your silence is indeed to be

bought, the terms must be arranged between you and me."

She looked at him a trifle insolently.  
"I have already explained to Mr. Greatson," she remarked, "that bargaining between you and me is impossible, because you have nothing to offer which could tempt me."

"And Mr. Greatson has?"  
"That, monsieur," she answered, "is between Mr. Greatson and myself."

Monsieur Feurges stood his ground.  
"Lady Delahaye," he said, "I want you to listen to me a moment. It is not a justification which I am attempting. It is just a word or two of explanation, to which I trust you will not refuse to listen."

"If you think it worth while," she answered coldly.

He shrugged his shoulders.  
"Who can tell! I have the fancy, however, to assure you that what took place that day at the Cafe Grand was not the impulsive act of a man inspired with a homicidal mania, but was the necessary outcome of a long sequence of events. You know the peculiar relations existing between Isobel and myself. I had not the right to approach her, or to assume any overt act of guardianship. Any association with me would at once have imperilled any chance she may have possessed of being restored to her rightful position at Waldenburg. I accordingly

could only watch over her by means of spies. This I have always done. With what object, Monsieur Feurges? Lady Delahaye asked. "You should never have interfered."

"The care of Isobel—the distant care of her—was a charge laid upon me by her mother," Feurges answered. "It was, therefore, sacred. I trusted to Fate to find those who might intervene where I dared not, and Fate sent me at a very critical

moment Mr. Arnold Greatson. Lady Delahaye, to speak ill of a woman who is no pleasant task—to speak ill of the dead is more painful still. Yet these are facts. The Archduchess was willing to go to any lengths to prevent Isobel's creditable and honorable appearance in Waldenburg. It was the Archduchess who, after what she has termed her sister's

disgrace, sent Isobel secretly to the convent, and your husband, Lady Delahaye, who took her there. It was your husband who brought her away, and it was the announcement of his visit to the convent, and an ill-advised confidence to a friend at his club in Paris, which brought me home from America. I will only say that I had reason to suspect Major Delahaye as the guardian of Isobel—even the Archduchess was ignorant of the position which he had assumed. Since I became a player there are many who forget that my family is noble. Major Delahaye was one of these. He returned a letter which I wrote to him with a contemptuous remark only. My friend the Duc d'Autric saw him on my behalf. From him your husband received a second and a very plain warning. He disregarded it. Once more I wrote. I warned him that if he took Isobel from the convent he went to his death. That is all!"

There was a silence. Lady Delahaye was very pale. She looked imploringly at me.

"Monsieur Feurges," she said, "I am not your judge. I do not wish to seem vindictive. Will you leave me with Mr. Greatson for a few moments?"

"Madame, I cannot," he answered gravely. "Apart from the fact that I decline to have my safety purchased for me, especially by one to whom I already owe too much, it is necessary that Mr. Greatson leaves this house within the next quarter of an hour."

I sprang to my feet. I forgot Lady Delahaye. I forgot that this man's life and freedom rested at her disposal. The great selfishness was upon me.

"I am ready!" I exclaimed.

Lady Delahaye looked, and she understood. Slowly she rose to her feet and crossed the room towards the door. I was tongue-tied. I made no protest—asked no questions. Feurges opened the door for her and summoned his servant, but no word of any sort passed between them. Then he turned suddenly to me. His tone was changed. He was quick and alert.

"Arnold," he said, "the rest is with you. They are taking her to the convent. Madame Richard is here, and the others to aid her. They have a plot—but never mind that. If she passes the threshold

of the convent she is lost. It is for you to prevent it."

"I am ready," I cried.

He opened a desk and tossed me a small revolver.

"Esters waits below in the carriage. He will drive with you to the station. You take the ordinary express to Marcon. There an automobile waits for you, and you must start for the convent. The driver has the route. Remember this. You must go alone. You must overtake them. Use force if necessary. If you fail—Isobel is lost!"

"I shall not fail!" I answered grimly.

"Bring her back, Arnold," he said, with a sudden change in his tone. "I want to see her once more."

I left him there, and glancing upwards from the street as the carriage drove off, I waved my hand to the slim black figure at the window, whose wan, weary eyes watched our departure with an expression which at the time I could not fathom. It was not until I was actually in the train that I remembered what Lady Delahaye's silent departure might mean for him.

CHAPTER XXX  
OUR plans were skillfully enough laid, but the Archduchess also had missed nothing. We rushed through the village of Arguel without having seen any sign of the carriage, and it was not until we had reached the vineyard-bordered road beyond that we saw it at last climbing the last hill to the convent.

"Shall we catch it?" I gasped.

The chauffeur only smiled.

"Monsieur may rest assured," he answered, changing into his fourth speed, notwithstanding the slight ascent.

Half-way up the hill we were barely one hundred yards behind. The man glanced at me for instructions.

"Blow your horn," I said.

He obeyed. The carriage drew to the side of the road. We rushed by, and I caught a glimpse of three faces. My spirits rose. There was only the Baron to deal with. Madame Richard and Isobel were the other occupants of the carriage.

"Stop, and draw the car across the road!" I ordered.

The man obeyed. I sprang to the ground. The Baron had his head out of the window, and the driver was flogging his horses.

"If you do not stop," I called out, "I shall shoot your horses."

The driver took no notice. He had flogged his horses into a gallop, and was coming straight at me. I fired, and one of the horses, after a wild plunge came down, dragging the other with him, and breaking the pole. The driver was thrown on to the top of them and rolled off into the hedge, cursing volubly. The Baron leaned out of the window, and he had something in his hand which gleamed like silver in the sunlight.

"I have had enough of you, my young friend," he said fiercely, and instantly fired.

An unseen hand struck his arm as he pulled the trigger. I felt my hat quiver upon my head as I sprang forward. The Baron had no time to fire again. I caught him by the throat and dragged him into the road.

"I have had more than enough of you, you blackguard," I muttered, and I shook him till he groaned, and threw him across the road.

Isobel stretched out her arms to me—Isobel herself, but how pale and changed!

"Arnold, Arnold, take me away!" she moaned.

I would have lifted her out, but Madame Richard had seized her. "The child is vowed," she said. "You shall not touch her."

The woman's black eyes flashed terrible things at me, and she wound herself round Isobel with a marvellous strength. For a moment I was helpless.

"Madame," I said, "I have never yet raised my hand against a woman, but if you do not release that girl this moment I shall have to forget your sex."

"Never!" she shrieked. "Help! Baron! Cocher!"

Some blue-bloused men looked up from their work in the vineyards a long way off. It was no time for hesitation. I set my teeth, and I caught hold of the woman's arms. Her bones cracked in my hands before she let go. Isobel at last was free!

"Jump up and get in the automobile, Isobel!" I said. "Bear up, dear! It is only a moment now."

Half fainting she staggered out and groped her way across the road. Once she nearly fell, but my chauffeur leaped down and caught her. Then Madame Richard looked in my eyes and cursed me with slow, solemn words.

I sprang away from her. She followed. I jumped into the automobile. She stood in front of it and dared us to start. The driver backed a little, suddenly shot forward, and with a wonderful curve avoided her. She ran to meet the peasants who were streaming now across the fields. We could hear for a few minutes her shrill cries to them. Then the vineyards became patchwork, and the still air a rushing wind. Our chauffeur sat grim and motionless like a figure of fate, and we did our forty miles an hour.

"You have orders?" I asked him once.

"But yes, monsieur," he answered.

(Continued on Next Page.)



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